

August 26, 2004

West Nile Virus Found in Bird in Gooding County

A magpie in Gooding County has tested positive for West Nile virus, heralding the first time the disease has been discovered in an indicator species in the state of Idaho. The discovery of the first infected bird follows closely on the identification of West Nile infections in a few horses in Canyon County, eastern Oregon, and northern Utah in recent weeks.

“This case indicates the virus is spreading rapidly, so people need to take precautions to protect themselves and their families from mosquito bites,” said Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Idaho Deputy State Epidemiologist.

The dead magpie was submitted to South Central District Health on August 23 for testing. After swabbing the bird’s mouth, samples were sent to the Idaho State Laboratory in Boise for analysis. Two tests confirmed the presence of West Nile virus on August 25.

Idaho surveys mosquito populations for the virus, as well as tests dead magpies, crows, jays and raptors, such as red tail hawks, submitted through District Health departments. West Nile virus has a high mortality rate among these birds, and most states have discovered the virus in their states through dead bird testing. Mosquitoes become infected with the virus when they bite birds or horses carrying the disease. The disease is then transmitted to humans and horses by mosquitoes.

South Central District Health, Idaho Fish and Game, and the Department of Health and Welfare have been supporting screening processes across the state for dead indicator birds and mosquitoes. South Central District Health has also been conducting weekly trapping of mosquitoes since June at four locations in the Magic and Wood River valleys, including the Hagerman Valley, but no mosquito populations have tested positive so far this season. State veterinarians have also been active in promoting vaccinations for horses since West Nile virus began moving across the United States several years ago.

“We don’t know if the bird contracted the virus in Gooding County or contracted it someplace else and flew into the county to die,” said Karin Frodin, RN, Epidemiologist for South Central District Health. “We have been trapping mosquitoes within 10 miles of the location where the magpie was found, but have found no mosquito populations infected with West Nile virus.”

Idaho’s first human case of West Nile virus occurred in Twin Falls County in October 2003. The man worked with a Twin Falls County alligator farm and is believed to have contracted the virus after he worked with sick alligators later determined to be carrying the disease. The man made a full recovery. Mosquito traps set near the farm during the 2004 season have yielded no mosquitoes infected with West Nile virus, nor have any positive mosquitoes been found at the state fish hatchery located in Hagerman.

“We have known for some time that West Nile was coming,” said Frodin. “The first documented case in the United States occurred in New York in 1999, and the disease has spread steadily westward into every state except Washington, Alaska, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia.

Most human infections of West Nile virus are mild or have no symptoms. Approximately 20 percent of those infected develop a generally mild fever that last from 3 to 6 days and begins from 3 to 14 days after infection. Symptoms often include: fever and headache, muscle aches, tiredness, nausea and vomiting, eye pain, skin rash, and enlarged lymph nodes. Less than one percent of people infected develop serious neurological disease. Those over age 50 are more susceptible to serious complications from the virus. People are encouraged to consult their health care provider if they have concerns about their health. Blood tests are available for those with symptoms, but two samples three weeks apart are needed for confirmation of West Nile virus.

There is no vaccine to protect humans against the virus, but horses can be vaccinated for West Nile virus. So far this year, there have been 843 human cases of West Nile virus in the United States and 20 deaths.

Froding advises people to insect proof their homes and reduce standing water on their property that might provide breeding habitat for mosquitoes. Other tips include:

- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors.
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children.
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk.
- Empty birdbaths and clean decorative ponds every three to six days.
- Report dead birds to your local District Health or Fish and Game office.

For more information about the West Nile virus, please visit the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare's West Nile virus web site at <http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>. Additional information can also be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm>